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AUTHOR	Galloway, Ann
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ABSTRACT

This digest looks at the communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages. It is intended as an introduction to the communicative approach for teachers and teachers-in-training who want to provide opportunities in the classroom for their students to engage in real-life communication in the target language. Questions to be dealt with include what the communicative approach is, where it came from, and how teachers' and students' roles differ from the roles they play in other teaching approaches. Examples of exercises that can be used with a communicative approach are described, and sources of appropriate materials are provided. (VWL)

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ERIC Digest

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Prepared by Ann Galloway, Center for Applied Linguistics

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Digest

June 1993

Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction and Sample Activities (EDO-FL-93-05)

Prepared by Ann Galloway, Center for Applied Linguistics

This digest will take a look at the communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages. It is intended as an introduction to the communicative approach for teachers and teachers-in-training who want to provide opportunities in the classroom for their students to engage in real-life communication in the target language. Questions to be dealt with include what the communicative approach is, where it came from, and how teachers' and students' roles differ from the roles they play in other teaching approaches. Examples of exercises that can be used with a communicative approach are described, and sources of appropriate materials are provided.

Where does communicative language teaching come from?

Its origins are many, insofar as one teaching methodology tends to influence the next. The communicative approach could be said to be the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the audiolingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction. They felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language. They did not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions; in brief, they were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied. Interest in and development of communicative-style teaching mushroomed in the 1970s; authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another became quite popular.

In the intervening years, the communicative approach has been adapted to the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and the underlying philosophy has spawned different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including *notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction,* and *communicative language teaching.*

What is communicative language teaching?

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audiolingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, writes in explaining Firth's view that "language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)" (Berns, 1984, p. 5).

What are some examples of communicative exercises?

In a communicative classroom for beginners, the teacher might begin by passing out cards, each with a different name printed on it. The teacher then proceeds to model an exchange of introductions in the target language: "*Guten Tag. Wie heissen Sie?*" Reply: "*Ich heisse Wolfie,*" for example. Using a combination of the target language and gestures, the teacher conveys the task at hand, and gets the students to introduce themselves and ask their classmates for information. They are responding in German to a question in German. They do not know the answers beforehand, as they are each holding cards with their new identities written on them; hence, there is an authentic exchange of information.

Later during the class, as a reinforcement listening exercise, the students might hear a recorded exchange between two German freshmen meeting each other for the first time at the Gymnasium doors. Then the teacher might explain, in English, the differences among German greetings in various social situations. Finally, the teacher will explain some of the grammar points and structures used.

The following exercise is taken from a 1987 workshop on communicative foreign language teaching, given for Delaware language teachers by Karen Willetts and Lynn Thompson of the Center for Applied Linguistics. The exercise, called "Eavesdropping," is aimed at advanced students.

Instructions to students: Listen to a conversation somewhere in a public place and be prepared to answer, in the target language, some general questions about what was said.

1. Who was talking?
2. About how old were they?
3. Where were they when you eavesdropped?
4. What were they talking about?
5. What did they say?
6. Did they become aware that you were listening to them?

The exercise puts students in a real-world listening situation where they must report information overheard. Most likely they have an opinion of the topic, and a class discussion could follow, in the target language, about their experiences and viewpoints. Communicative exercises such as this motivate the students by treating topics of their choice, at an appropriately challenging level.

Another exercise taken from the same source is for beginning students of Spanish. In "Listening for the Gist," students are placed in an everyday situation where they must listen to an authentic text.

Objective: Students listen to a passage to get general understanding of the topic or message.

Directions: Have students listen to the following announcement to decide what the speaker is promoting.

Passage: *Situacion ideal . . . Servicio de transporte al Aeropuerto Internacional . . . Cuarenta y dos habitaciones de lujo, con aire condicionado . . . Elegante restaurante . . . de fama internacional.*

(The announcement can be read by the teacher or played on tape.) Then ask students to circle the letter of the most appropriate answer on their copy, which consists of the following multiple-choice options:

a. a taxi service b. a hotel c an airport d. a restaurant

(Source: Adapted from Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool, 1980, Item No. 13019)

Gunter Gerngross, an English teacher in Austria, gives an example of how he makes his lessons more communicative. He cites a widely used textbook that shows English children having a pet show. "Even when learners act out this scene creatively and enthusiastically, they do not reach the depth of involvement that is almost tangible when they act out a short text that presents a family conflict revolving round the question of whether the children should be allowed to have a pet or not" (Gerngross & Puchta, 1984, p. 92). He continues to say that the communicative approach "puts great emphasis on listening, which implies an active will to try to understand others. [This is] one of the hardest tasks to achieve because the children are used to listening to the teacher but not to their peers. There are no quick, set recipes. That the teacher be a patient listener is the basic requirement" (p.98).

The observation by Gerngross on the role of the teacher as one of listener rather than speaker brings up several points to be discussed in the next portion of this digest.

How do the roles of the teacher and student change in communicative language teaching?

Teachers in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and listening more—becoming active facilitators of their students' learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet however. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Where can I learn more about communicative teaching?

All of the following documents on communicative language teaching are in the ERIC database. They can be read on microfiche at any library housing an ERIC collection or purchased in microfiche or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852 (1-800-443-3742).

Ben-Barka, A. C. [1982]. *In search of a language teaching framework: An adaptation of a communicative approach to functional practice.* (EDRS No. ED239507, 26 pages)

Das, B. K. (Ed.) (1984). *Communicative language teaching. Selected papers from the RELC seminar (Singapore). Anthology Series 14.* (EDRS No. ED266661, 234 pages)

Littlewood, W. T. (1983). *Communicative approach to language teaching methodology* (CLCS Occasional Paper No. 7). Dublin: Dublin University Trinity College, Centre for Language and Communication Studies. (EDRS No. ED235690, 23 pages)

Pattison, P. (1987). *The communicative approach and classroom realities.* (EDRS No. ED288407, 17 pages)

Riley, P. (1982). *Topics in communicative methodology: Including a preliminary and selective bibliography on the communicative approach.* (EDRS No. ED231213, 31 pages)

Savignon, S. J., & Berns, M. S. (Eds.). (1983). Communicative language teaching: Where are we going? *Studies in Language Learning, 4*(2). (EDRS No. ED278226, 210 pages)

Sheils, J. (1986). *Implications of the communicative approach for the role of the teacher.* (EDRS No. ED268831, 7 pages)

Swain, M., & Canale, M. (1982). *The role of grammar in a communicative approach to second language teaching and testing.* (EDRS No. ED221026, 8 pages) (not available separately; available from EDRS as part of ED221023, 138 pages)

Willems, G., & Riley, P. (Eds.). (1984). *Communicative foreign language teaching and the training of foreign language teachers.* (EDRS No. ED273102, 219 pages)

Readers may also wish to consult the following journal articles for additional information on communicative language teaching.

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Larsen-Freeman, D. (1986). *Techniques and principles in language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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